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WOMAN SUFFRAGE

BY GWENDOLEN OVERTON

WITHIN quite recent times the world at large has become willing to concede that there are certain sciences whose principles are fixed, and are not determined by the sentiments or uninstructed opinions of either the many or the few. But that branch of knowledge which is concerned with the evolution of the human race, individually and in its social aspect, is by no means accorded this status. It is popularly looked upon as an equation of the moment's beliefs, or at best nothing more definite than the ideas of a small number of men who have withdrawn themselves for contemplation, and are therefore out of touch with and unfitted to judge their race. The conduct of individuals being almost universally without conscious plan, it is difficult for them to conceive that the aggregation may nevertheless be advancing systematically. The utmost judicial disposition to be expected is an ability to see the immediate effects of an applied theory. And even from this are drawn conclusions quite likely to be vitiated by failure to reckon with other causes.

An excellent demonstration lies in the general attitude toward what is probably the most important and the most abstractly ethical movement occupying the attention of society at the present day. Yet a subject so momentous, so " gigantic a constitutional change " as that of the full enfranchisement of adult civilized humanity, requires to be approached with the deference of a serious attempt at understanding. It is not to be disposed of by such trivial arguments either in its favor or disfavor, as have been commonly resorted to. Neither is it actually affected by quoting opponents and supporters, though they be so exalted, upon one side as Queen Victoria and upon the other as Plato, Ward, Whitman, Lincoln, John Stuart Mill, and provisionally—Herbert Spencer.

Absurd as this may seem to many, it is even unaffected by how the suffrage of women may thus far have worked out in the localities where it has been tried. Unfortunately, broad and universal issues are less generally comprehensible than such quibbles and scattered facts as have been made use of in both camps. From our friends in this case, as well as from our enemies, we need only too frequently to pray for deliverance. Both have thrown upon those who would argue rationally an undue burden of disproof.

Whether or not the results of woman suffrage have so far seemed good, whether or not women are well informed upon matters pertaining to government, whether or not the majority of women now wish to vote, is actually of little consequence. The merits lie in nothing of this sort, but solely in whether or not the sharing of women in all functions of government appears to be in accord with the direction thus far taken by our advancing race. For, though it may seem to many nonsense beyond paradox, nothing is so practical as theory, which has in life exactly the same value as in mathematics. It has been aptly said that unless a theory is good for the extreme case, it is good for nothing at all. And conversely—if a thing is good in the extreme case, it is correct theoretically. That which should be sought, therefore, is whether or not, as a question of historical and ethical sequence, in the extreme case of a highly developed society, it will be desirable for women to have the franchise. But an approximate idea of what conditions constitute a highly developed society can only be arrived at by deduction, by trying to judge what humanity will reach from what it has moved toward.

As the point of departure, it may be well to consider briefly the comparative physical structure of men and women. In outward form it is perfectly evident that woman is midway between child and man. This, however, may not fix her place lower in the scale of development so much as it better fits her for her part in reproduction—that function whose sufficient exercise gives her her only fundamental and permanent reason for existence; and gives, too, her only adequately based claim to an equal share in the advanced activities of the race.

In the plan of Nature, a very large part of woman's life is designed to be spent in the reproduction of the race. It is the specialty pre-arranged for her and to which her structure is adapted. But inferiority is not necessarily proved thereby. The result of recent experiments leads one to conclude that the two sexes are developed not unequally, but to different ends. After compiling and examining elaborate statistics, Professor Thomas sets it down that " man consumes energy more rapidly; woman is more conservative of it. The structural variability of man is mainly toward motion; woman's variational tendency is not toward motion, but toward reproduction. Man is fitted for feats of strength and bursts of energy; woman has more stability and endurance. While woman remains nearer to the infantile type, man approaches more to the senile. The extreme variational tendency of man expresses itself in a larger percentage of genius, insanity, and idiocy; woman remains more nearly normal."

As regards the brain size of woman, it is far from being determined that her brain weighs less in proportion to her whole weight than that of man; but, according to the above authority, " The importance of brain weight in relation to intelligence has usually been exaggerated by anthropologists; for intelligence depends on the rapidity and range of the acts of associative memory, and this in turn on the complexity of the neural processes." Biologically considered, therefore, there does not seem to be unquestionable warrant for restricting woman to a subordinate position.

In respect of psychological characteristics—they are probably in accord with the physiologic ones. But this would open up a whole field of discussion admitting of little else than individual opinion. One can scarcely forbear from remarking that all those qualities which are fostered in woman as lovely and laudable for family life, are adduced as liable to prove vicious in the extreme if given play in government. And the only inference to be drawn is that some ethical value is false either in the family or in the state. But so long as these qualities are desired, and the whole training of the civilized female, from infancy onward, so essentially differs from that of the male, no just comparison of their minds is possible. Nor is it possible to predicate anything final of woman's nature until it shall have been given full play.

Save in the case of a few savage races which deemed it surest to count descent in the female line, woman has always been held in a subordinate position. But rather than maintain this to be her destined status for all time, it could conceivably be attributed to the insufficient development of man. As the sense of justice has grown, he has, of his own volition, worked to improve the position of woman both theoretically and actually.

In England the lawyers who were dissatisfied with woman's standing under the common law set themselves to bring about a change. It was done, however, not by Parliament, but by the judges of the Court of Chancery, who, it may be supposed, represented a higher average of trained intellect. Blackstone had written that "the very being and legal existence of woman is suspended during marriage." And further—with the complacency which imposed itself upon Englishmen during the long subsequent period known as that of legislative quiescence—"even the disabilities which the wife lies under are for the most part intended for her protection and benefit. So great a favorite is the female sex of the laws of England."

The Court of Chancery appears not to have shared this comfortable conviction, and by patient and prolonged effort it brought about a better condition—subsequently endorsed by Parliament. As laws form public opinion quite as much as public opinion forms the laws, these conditions are now accepted as a matter of course in English-speaking lands, and the earlier ones are looked back upon as unjust and absurd.

True, the change came slowly; but men of advanced minds must needs work with the inferior material at hand; and reforms involving great changes, especially such as touch the family relations, cannot be quickly brought about. Those who would have the world-old status of woman altered forthwith will do well to remember the words of the historian: "*La Providence a ses aises dans le temps. Elle y marche comme les Dieux d'Homère dans l'espace. Elle fait un pas —et les siècles se trouvent écoulés.*"

But it is of interest and significance to note that every social movement which we now recognize as having been of advance was met in its time by objections practically identical with those brought into service to defeat the enfranchisement of women. History, indeed, broadly considered, deals with nothing else. To go no farther back than the era which ushers in the modern world, we find the protest that the Reformation would result in every evil, "multiplicity of sects, prodigious intellectual license, dissolution of all society, tyranny, and persecution.'' Those who strove for the freedom of the communes condemned as dangerous the activities of those who maintained the rights of human reason; and the latter countercharged with prophesies of '' abominable disorders and society disturbed.''

King John doubtless found the conduct of the barons fully as '' shocking '' as the actions of the militant suffragists are considered in certain quarters—even probably by the male voters who have recently rioted at the British polls. What was foretold of allowing the French populace to share in government need scarcely be recalled. And in the struggle for manhood suffrage in England—so late as the first part of the nineteenth century—it was contended that the lower classes would swamp the intelligent classes, discouraging them from voting at all; and that the workingman would be controlled by a small number of agitators.

The alteration of a married woman's property status before referred to was opposed upon the score—wearisomely familiar to the ear of those who take interest in the subject of female suffrage—that dissensions and trouble would be caused in the home.

As for the recent movement of those sincere and convinced women who have felt it their duty to oppose the franchise for their sex, it might seem to have disposed of the whole matter in a fashion not devoid of a humorous element. But there are certain cross-currents in the stream of public opinion which are perfectly recognized by all who treat of legislation or jurisprudence, and it must be remembered that in the long run the affirmative class monopolizes the homage of mankind. Says Thomas Carlyle: '' It is with all these things as with the ebbing of the sea; you look at the waves oscillating hither and thither on the beach; for minutes you cannot tell how it is going. Look in half an hour where it is.'' Measured by the standard of history, it is the briefest possible time since woman was where the already quoted optimism of Blackstone described her. To-day she has the partial franchise in a great many localities, the full franchise in five of the United States; in Australia she has recently raised doubts in the minds of those who hold that her political influence will be conservative, and in Finland she sits in the seats of power.

So much for the past and present aspects of the question.

But to examine it in respect of its conformance to basic principles. It should, perhaps, be said at once that " taxation without representation " is not one of these. Neither are two which have recently been advanced as such: " that no electorate has ever existed or ever can exist which cannot execute its own laws," and " no voter has ever claimed or ever can claim maintenance from another voter." These are merely deductions from certain conditions of government in the process of evolution. They rank rather below such principles formerly considered basic, as slavery, the refusal of citizenship to mechanics, the supremacy of the Holy See above all temporal rulers, and the divine right of kings. Indeed, the assertion that no voter ever has claimed or ever can claim maintenance of another voter is disposed of by the very writer who advances it within a page or two of its presentation, as she informs us that " women in suffrage States are liable for the support of their husbands in certain contingencies " and " six women in Utah were divorced by their husbands for non-support." There is, moreover, no recognized legal obstacle to a contract, such as that of marriage, which would make it possible for a voter to claim maintenance during the period of performing certain acts and fulfilling certain conditions.

That no electorate has ever existed or ever can exist which cannot execute its own laws is in point of fact wholly beside the question—founded, as it is, upon the false premise that women would form *an* electorate—separate and independent.

The actual basic principles of social evolution are as follows:

That the human race advances from uniformity to heterogeneity, from the performance of a few functions to performance of many.

That the family group ceases to be the political unit and is superseded by the individual.

That it is desirable for each to gain the fullest life compatible with the fullest lives of fellow-citizens.

That society is benefited by all its members receiving to the full the good and evil results of their conduct.

Not only does the principle of women suffrage appear to be in accord with these self-evident propositions, but the refusal of it is in antagonism to them.

To oblige woman to limit the number of her activities is to check development toward manifold functions and well-balanced natures.

The family group ceasing to be the political unit, and the individual replacing it, a system cannot be sound where only the adult male has the right of full share in government, and individuals numbering half the race are excluded.

If it is desirable for each to gain the fullest life compatible with the fullest lives of fellow-citizens, then it is undesirable to refuse to women as complete a life as civilization makes possible, provided their having it does not deprive others.

If society is benefited by all its members receiving to the full the good and evil results of their conduct, then it is harmed by a system which takes from any one the exact compensation for good or evil actions, and constrains him to accept both benefits and ills that are caused by others.

As for social evolution considered in the experiments of government, unquestionably we may say that the trend seems to be toward Democracy, Representation, Justice, Freedom, and Peace. And it must necessarily be asked whether in the highly developed society which may have attained these conditions in fair measure it would be suitable and appropriate for woman to have the franchise.

Democracy is the rule of the whole people and this could only logically be the whole adult population.

Representation is government by those who are delegated to express the common will, and a State is not adequately represented by only half its members, more especially when these are of a single sex. Though the ballot is not a fundamental right, freedom of expression is such, and it is denied where a very powerful means of expression is withheld.

Justice is the refusal of special privilege, and its requirements can only be met by granting to all adults exactly equal rights with no exemptions not imposed by the physical structure.

Freedom is defined by the least theoretical of philosophic schools as "in its socially restricted form, the absence of any other external checks than those arising from the presence of other men who have like claims to do what their will prompts." Therefore, unless woman is a perpetual incompetent, without claim to do what her will prompts, her enfranchisement is necessary to social freedom.

What is meant by peace in the governmental sense is a condition of society where disputes and differences are settled by appeal to law or reason. That the civilized world is moving toward a condition of general peace is apparent, despite the alarms of several European countries. It is universally felt that "thoroughly just conditions cannot obtain in a militant state," and, as has been said by an Englishman variously distinguished, the task of the statesmen of the future will be to substitute the concert of nations for their conflict. Historically, the period of general militancy is past. Formerly all men were warriors; to-day even in the Old World it is the relatively few. And in the United States the standing army exists almost on sufferance with the populace, whilst those familiar with its conditions from within cannot but recognize it to be almost wholly out of touch with the advanced thought of the age.

In a society which has attained to a condition of practical peace, there would be removed the objection to the enfranchisement of women which is always adduced in the last issue—that she is unable to fight in the defense of her country and its institutions.

It must be allowed, of course, that, though the world may be moving toward a state of peace, the goal is by no means reached. And until such time there might hold good the objection to giving non-combatants the ballot. But, setting aside the question why a non-combatant may not help to govern quite as well as she may occupy the throne, it should be considered whether by far too much has not been made of this argument, and whether in justice and reason, the bearing of children may not be accounted as much a service to the State as the bearing of arms. So far as physical and moral qualities are concerned, it perhaps calls for at least an equal endurance, courage, and fortitude.

The very considerable majority of women bear children. In any contingency at all likely to arise the decided minority of men bear arms. Nor is it fairly to be urged that during the period of reproduction women should be, and usually are, supported and removed from the field of industrial competition. Men are paid and maintained when they serve as soldiers, and having so served during a specified time, they are supported by the State either wholly or in part.

Should this appear to place the bearing of children where "The Republic" places it, among duties to the State, a sufficiently educated race will doubtless so consider it; and woman will feel that to achieve a genuine equality with man she must specialize upon this unique function as the other sex does upon superior strength, for woman is primarily a producer of her kind and any system must fail wherein this is disregarded or ignored.

As regards the ability to resort to force in the final issue, which alone makes the ballot efficacious, an electorate must certainly be able to enforce its own laws. But in a day of fairly advanced social development, society delegates its force. This could quite as well be done by an electorate of both sexes, as now by one composed entirely of males. At present a trained and physically powerful portion of voters, and a very small portion, sees to it that the ballot can be safely cast and that the laws are enforced. Those voters who, by reason of disinclination or of inferior bodily equipment could not stand against rioters at the polls, depend upon the protection and assistance of policemen or militia. Very recently the national guard was demanded to enable the non-combatant citizens of one of our new States to cast their ballots. And latterly in England as many as two hundred policemen were in requisition at one spot. There is also to be borne in mind that the postal ballot system has an increasing number of advocates who believe that economy would not be the only one of its advantages.

It were futile to deny that granting the franchise to women will be attended with complications and difficulties. But no great reform in the individual or in society was ever accomplished without these, and a people whose moral condition is healthy will not shrink.

Nations whose laws are inelastic and unchanging, nations which come to feel that man was made for the law, die in the cords with which they have wrapped themselves. What though the common law takes no cognizance of woman as a political entity? The common law is itself but the compiled recognition of what were once new conditions and imminent tendencies. Yet the anticipated troubles will probably not be so serious if we accept transitions as normal and do not attempt to check natural and sequent processes.

Perhaps the most tenable of all objections to granting the ballot to women, and one which leaves it something of an open question whether delay would not be wise, is based upon the mental qualifications of the sex. Undoubtedly women are in considerable ignorance regarding the forms and purposes of governments. Yet it is asking a good deal of any one that he should interest himself minutely in a matter with which he is allowed no direct and efficacious concern. And to bring up examples of women's absurd and impractical notions of political affairs is no more reasonable than to quote against men the preposterous legislation daily suggested or carried through. It were as just to make light of the average intelligence of our nation's fathers because, for example, Henry Clay held three years to be ample time for protection to place the manufactures of the country upon their feet. Nowhere, for that matter, is government so successful that it would be safe to confine the charge of ignorance or untenable doctrines to the female sex. Men were not fitted for the ballot when they obtained it, but if they have grown in political grace woman can do the same. All correct theories for the guidance of the race should be based upon what is the best to be expected, not the worst. It has been set down as a rule, that under any form of government the moral sense of the governing body is likely to fall far below the highest moral standard recognized by the community. But the white woman is with the white man, co-heir of all the ages; and as the phrase went among the theretofore privileged classes of England when suffrage was to be granted the unenfranchised—" we must educate our masters." Precisely in this lies the one correct solution of all the difficulties feared. Woman must be sufficiently educated—more than she is to-day—educated far beyond the present danger-point of a little knowledge, unrelated, theoretical and fragmentary, unfitting rather than fitting her for the duties of life.

In all likelihood it will be impossible to keep women a great deal longer from a share in the governments under which they live. It will be useless to offer " something else just as good "—that she shall undertake, for example, to check those arch terrors of the conservative, socialism and divorce. It will be equally futile to threaten that she will lose her property privileges in localities where they are accorded her. It is with women as with men—they " are not led by promises of ease and comfort, by sugar plums of any kind." Those who seek what they believe to be a right will never cease from fear of a pecuniary loss. What should we say, what do we say, of men who vote or withhold their vote from financial motives? Women will be ready to stand upon a property equality with men when they stand upon political equality. It is safe to say that women will be ready to give their purses to a principle for which men have given their lives. This, in fact, is the actual test of their fitness for the franchise, this and that they shall understand the thing they seek to be no mere gratification, but an added and onerous responsibility.

That which seems too little considered is what men themselves will gain by having woman on an equal footing by making of her a peer who must be judged as such. It will go far toward putting an end to that sense of privilege and exemption upon which woman falls back more and more as advancing society lessens the need of work and effort, making her a parasite, a creature out of touch with the realities of toil and fundamental things.

It is not expedient, not even good worldly policy, to be satisfied with less than the utmost perfection we can conceive, but only those who are given every opportunity can justly be blamed for failing of the best attainment. Yet throughout the ages this blame has been accorded woman, for, despite valiant efforts to idealize her, she has never been to civilized man what he actually wished. She has left him always vaguely unsatisfied, apologizing for her by the phrases of the poets and by the makeshift of a dual standard. The companion of his life and the mother of his race was one to whom he might condescend. But if he would do at least his best to remedy this unfortunate condition of affairs, he must needs face the realization that responsibility begets the power to meet and be worthy of it; and that the highest, the most desirable results are never to be obtained from a restricted and inferior class.

GWENDOLEN OVERTON.